

AXIOMS IN SEARCH OF INDEPENDENCE

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1.1 Culture is not a mere instrument of politics; it is the site on which politics is made, unmade, abused, and appropriated. Far from being neutral, culture is the battleground of politics in India today.

1.2 Neither a commodity to be consumed, nor a rhetoric to be shouted from rooftops or reduced to pulp in seminar halls, culture is an activity that has to be ceaselessly renewed through painstaking labour and reflexivity. Even the most radical of cultural practices needs to be re-invented in order to avoid being fossilized.

1.3 'Let the dead bury the dead' (Marx): there is no room for nostalgia in cultural activism. Better to strategise a utopian moment in the cultural movement of the '40s - the Indian People's Theater Association (IPTA), the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) - than to perpetuate its legacy with moribund practices.

1.4 'Culture is ordinary' (Raymond Williams): it is not a Himalayan construction (the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts), out of the reach of people, distanced from what is everyday, popular, immediate. From these make-believe Himalayas, the diversity of Indian cultures is truly panoramic. But when you get down to earth, you could find yourself living in ignorance about what is happening in your own locality or in a neighboring state.

Better to avoid the neo-brahminic, false consciousness of such Himalayas, essentially non-negotiable, and perhaps, more 'Archimedean' (Akeel Bilgrami) than the secularism on which the Indian nation-state was built in the 50s.

1.5 Culture as process: this could be a more viable premise for those activists committed to the creativity of ongoing struggles. At a homely level, think of that element in *dahi* which makes the milk curdle. Culture is that catalytic element which keeps humanity alive through riots and the most brutal breakdowns of trust.

2.1 A moratorium on blind illusions: the wounds from partitions and separations continue to fester, despite attempts at reconciliation. Activists cannot afford to be too euphoric about permanent solutions; better to nurture dreams through the filter of doubts. In the face of adversity, retain a notion of 'positive failure' (O.V. Vijayan).

2.2 A 'realized Utopia can be another name for terror' (Ashis Nandy). It is safer to think of utopias in the making, vulnerable utopias on the point of collapse: these imminent failures can ensure an absence of complacency.

2.3 No artist/activist can afford to say, 'I've arrived'. Cultural workers in any struggle are always on the move, but sometimes they need to rest. We need *dharamshalas* in the sites of conflict. Along with the regimen of struggle, there should also be the 'care of the

self', as Gandhi understood more deeply than Foucault. Not just the inner self, but the body that encloses the ferment of any struggle.

Most activists seem to have forgotten their bodies (Chandralekha); violate their own bodies through calculated indifference, if not a rejection of their senses. This can only lead to a quick burn-out, if not premature death.

3.1 A falsely spiritualized notion of 'culture' can become an alibi for not owning up to the failures of development within one's practice. It can also divert attention away from those realities that refuse to die - poverty, unemployment, malnutrition, illiteracy. Soul-searching should not legitimize political amnesia: this can only result in self-mystification.

3.2 On the other hand, for the die-hard activist who regards culture with contempt, or who engages only in that form of cultural praxis that is politically correct, there is the risk of puritanism with its inevitable absence of humour. Secularists should not lose their capacity to laugh: it is the most potent weapon against fundamentalism of any kind.

4.1 It is not enough to 'talk' culture as an activist, you have to get down on your hands and knees and 'do' it. This means that if you are inaugurating a seminar on ecology, you do not simply go through the pretence of making a Kolam knowing nothing about their colours, textures, shapes, and infinite forms. Metaphors of ecology should not be mistaken for realities.

4.2 Likewise, when cultural workers attempt to align themselves with social and political movements, they have to realise that politics is not simply the 'art of the possible', but a strenuous discipline. It is not simply a matter of 'doing your own thing', but of channelizing the politics of the self through collective demands.

5.1 A question of 'bad faith' arises when you 'turn to tradition' opportunistically to seek new strategies of communication (for example, Bhakti and Sufi cultural resources that have been compared to 'fixed deposits' on which one can rely in times of crisis).

At the same time, it is disingenuous to assume that 'tradition' is a repository of universal and tolerant values that lies beyond questioning. How do we measure these a priori values of toleration (Javed Alam) when traditional cultures are also known to be exclusivist and embedded with patriarchal taboos?

5.2 Like tradition, 'faith' is not unquestionable. 'Even devils have faith...' (James 2.19). Besides, it is not a matter of retrieving resources of hope from any one faith or doctrine or belief; the challenge is to work *across* faiths, doctrines and beliefs. The dialogue is not merely with the Other on 'our' terms, or on 'their'

terms, but through a 'fusion of horizons' (Gandamer), a translation of differences.

5.3 How do differences get translated in a multilingual/multicultural society where there are no infrastructures for the translation of languages and cultures on an ongoing, dialogic basis? Begin by translating the 'secular' in-and across-all Indian languages.

6.1 Secularism is not a requiem for most ground; it is a fighting creed.

6.2 To fight, one cannot merely wait for one's forums to be attacked (SAHMAT's *Hum Sab Ayodhya*, M.F. Husain's painting in a gallery in Ahmedabad). While one cannot entirely predict such attacks, one should attempt to pre-empt them through collective vigilance and strategies of deference. One may also have to develop new modes of infiltration, through disguise, cunning, and new strategies of performativity (for example, Augusto Boal's 'invisible theater').

6.3 Enough wailing about 'Where is the space for my intervention?' Find that space outside the privileged enclaves of legitimized protest in the unmarked locations of the public sphere. Those who lament the absence of space could be looking in the wrong places to begin with.

6.4 Yet another wail: Our slogans are being appropriated, our language is being taken away from us. Develop new modes of re-appropriation. Here no illusions, however, that you are going to get back what you have lost in a pure state. Authenticities need to be contested. Contamination is the rule off the game.

6.5 language is particularly prone to contamination: it can never be taken for granted in any form of cultural activism. You cannot instance, reclaim the figure of Gandhi through Brecht's structure of the *lehrstucke* of the didactic learning play. The spectre of Stalin will continue to lurk in its interstices. You have to rework the form, literally dismantle it, in order to assert your new political affinities. Or else, you have to risk the unconscious schizophrenia of your representation.

7.1 The new Frankensteins of our times: beware of them. Erstwhile socialists advocating the market, global capitalists quoting Gandhi, fundamentalists endorsing Vivekanadam, anti-Sikh communal politicians leading peace marches in protest against the demolition of the Babri Misguide.

Beware also of the demons within the mind, the communal unconscious at work in ostensibly secular representations. No point in wondering about your 'anti-Muslim prejudice' (Vijay Tendulkar). The question is: Are you doing anything about it? Can you decommunalise your cultural practice?

7.2 Fascists do not come with fangs. They can be perfectly civilized people. Democratically voted into power, they can be forgiven their crimes even as they invoke the law to abuse the law.

How do we represent anti-fascism today, when unlike the Anti-Fascist Writers and Artists' Association (1942) which had resisted the fascisms of Hitler and Mussolini 'out there', we are confronting fascism within the body politic of an ostensibly free India. If the earlier task was to make the unfamiliar familiar through indigenisations of fascism, today we have to make the familiar unfamiliar. This is more risky.

8.1 Imperialism is no longer equated with Uncle Sam. It is at work through the new liberalizing disguises that have metamorphosed through the collisions of the nation-state and the agencies of global capitalism.

How do we get past the cliches of anti-imperialist protest? Can the agencies of capitalism in the mass media be used in order to be subverted? How does one avoid making a virtue out of poverty without being co-opted by the globalizing mechanisms of Ngos and foundations.

8.2 In attempting to broaden the scale of cultural activism, in re-fashioning its 'style of radical will', there is the danger of reducing politics to a spectacle, and of transforming a platform into a showcase for diverse talents (SAHMAT's *Muktmaad*). What are the new modes of political spectacle in the public sphere that can be negotiated, questioned, and if necessary, disrupted by the *public itself*?

9.1 The politics of the platform can only be sustained through a decentralized, fluid, and interruptive mode of setting up temporary activist sites, which can then be dismantled and set up again, in new spaces, with new agencies. Platform cannot be owned or publicized under any one banner.

9.2 Likewise, there can be no *one organizing* party for a secular cultural movement in India today. The Communist Party of India, which had coordinated the diverse activities of the IPTA, facilitating its tours in different parts of the country, is itself splintered and compelled to negotiate the politics of *coalition* with other secular parties in India today. How do we prepare the ground for this coalition at cultural levels?

9.3 Instead of the Rath Yatra, there can be a multitude of yatras, morchas, street plays, cycle rallies, 'Cricket for Peace'. anti-communal slogan competitions, cartoon exhibitions... Defeat the One with the Many, let a thousand activism bloom.

9.4 And yet, the need for linkages remains acute. If the State cannot be relied on to provide such links, how do activists network their agendas beyond pre-determined circuits? Can disorganization become the new point of departure for imagining new collectivities?

10.1 How to celebrate independence after 50 years of dependence, with self respect and a recognition of people's struggle: Perhaps we need to begin by remembering local heroes and heroines, forgotten martyrs, survivors of riots, trade unionists-those who represent subaltern communities at ground levels, but who are not likely to be

remembered in the official celebrations of independence in Mandi House and Albert Hall.

10.2 There is a need to recognize the pain that brings people together from diverse communities. In the aftermath of the Mumbai riots Hindus and Muslims have re-built each other's homes and shrines in the most communally afflicted of neighborhoods. Let us not allow the spectre of communalism to erase these acts of social solidarity.

If India has survived 'December 6', this cannot be attributed to the constitutional inviolability of secularism, but to the concrete ways in which a secular culture is being activist by ordinary citizens combating communalism in their struggle to live with differences.

10.3 In whose name, secularism? In our need to forge alliances across class, casts, and community, one has to listen to how people represent their own acts of resistance and solidarity. Secularism does not always get named, one has to respect its silences. At the same time, how does one mobilize a movement without naming it?

10.4 No movement can ignite without an imaginary. The secular imaginary is not just a cluster of slogans, songs, images, narratives, and dreams; it is also made up of differences and debates, suffering, wounds, and the hunger that continues to be engineered many years after Nabanna served as a rallying point for the IPTA imaginary.

10.5 At micro-levels, there is a need to risk a certain lightness in dealing with mega efficiencies: for instance, in place of the saffron headband, multicolored headbands (Charul Joshi's innovative response to the saffronisation of Ganesh Chaturthi in his neighborhood). Street fashion and 'rainbow politics' can go together. But not too much fashion, perhaps, or else we are left with the metropolitan idiocy of 'bermuda shorts' against 'saffron flags'.

11.1 Activists today find themselves in the unenviable situation of being positioned both within and against the State. We do not have the luxury to imagine ourselves 'beyond the nation' (Arjun Appadurai), in the tradition of First World diasporic intellectuals seeking 'translations'. 'Our' nation may yet have to be imagined for millions of people, lying outside its narrow parameters. 'Beyond the nation' we may be free of the State, but are we likely to imagine ourselves beyond the market?

11.2 The task today is to link the secular struggle not merely in opposition to communalism, but to the infiltration of global capitalism at the levels of Enron, Cogentrix, Kentucky Fried Chicken, the patenting of biodiversity, the satellite invasions, the Miss World Beauty Contest. The secular is not against the global perse; it is against those globalizing tendencies in the economy and culture that are intensifying disparities and injustices.

To avoid a critique of globalization in secular agendas is to play into the appropriations of swaraj by the forces on the Hindu Right.

12.1 Mera Bharat Mahan, Ekta, Good Morning, India: we can be justifiably cynical about these Doordarshan constructions. However, we could do with some patriotism, so long as it does not become a means of 'othering' those communities who are considered to be less patriotic because they do not qualify by the exclusive criteria of janmabhumi, pitrubhumi, punyabhumi. Patriotism is not a mere rhetoric, marked by fixed signs; it is a sentiment, a cluster of emotions that is linked to some nebulous feeling of love or affinity for where you belong.

12.2 Secular-ists need to reclaim and redefine the languages of patriotism, so that it does not get hijacked by the votaries of the Hindu Right. Like religiosity, patriot-ism has volatile ingredients. In addressing the symbol-ism of the national flag, for instance, one could retrieve the numerous debates during the freedom struggle that went into the creation of its form and colours. The flag did not just spring from Mother Earth. Likewise, with Bande Mataram, it is instructive to remember how sensitively Rabin-dranath Tagore had refrained from setting to music the entire poem, because he felt that the Hindu, religiosity of some of its verses could 'wound Muslim susceptibilities'. Such interreligious sensitivity can only deepen the complexities by which patriotism can be rendered outside of a monocultural, xenophobic context.

12.3 And finally, to Gandhi, the much maligned, increasingly contested Father of the Nation, who dared to imagine 'Utopia' in a vision of independence that was betrayed at many levels by the actuality of 15 August 1947:

In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be an ever-widening, never-ascending circle. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual.

The outermost-cir-cumference will not wield power to crush the inner circle but will give strength to all within and derive its own strength from it. While such utopias may not be realizable in our lifetime, they can nonetheless serve as points of reference for the ongoing struggles to realise social justice.

It is time to transform our tryst with destiny into a real commitment to 'the ending of poverty and ignorance and disease and inequality of opportunity'. This 'ending of poverty and ignorance and disease and inequality of opportunity'. This 'ending' was promised to us at the birth of the nation, and it needs to be reiterated fifty years later, as the nation begins to unlearn its euphoria through a growing sense of its realities.

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